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One Boy's Search for His Roots

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One Boy's Search for His Roots

by Verlene McOllough

Editor's note: Enormous and sometimes emotionally risky obstacles to genealogical research may await those individuals who were separated from their biological families during childhood. The following is one account of an individual's attempt to uncover his past, despite family ties severed at an early age.

IN FEBRUARY 1896, a father put his small son on a train, with a name tag pinned to his coat collar. Thus prepared for his future, five-year-old Ira Carrell was sent from Charleston, Illinois, to a Chicago orphanage.

The boy lived in the orphanage for ten months, and later claimed it was the happiest time of his childhood. On January 12, 1897, Ira was "placed out" to Mr. and Mrs. William Tressider, farmers, of White Oak Springs, Wisconsin. The couple had earlier lost three of the children born to them. They immediately renamed their new foster son Howard Edward.

"They just got me to work," he later said. He recollected that any complaint was taken by William Tressider as a refusal to obey and drew swift physical punishment. "When we went to church my father said if anyone asked about my bruises to say I'd fallen down the steps."

The boy liked school but was allowed to attend only when there was no farm work to do. At school the other kids taunted him about his oversized boots: "Old Billy Kazoots/got stuck in his boots."

With no affection extended at home, he was eager to leave and make his own way. He possessed an innate gift for humor and

Ira Carrell

made friends quickly. He felt pride in doing hard work for a wage. In farmer Joe Blackbourn, he found a job and an ally. Quick to learn, he took refuge in books.

In 1913, at a tent meeting in Dunbarton, Wisconsin, Howard Tressider met Ethel Matson, the preacher's daughter. Three days before Ethel was eighteen the two were married despite the objection of Reverend Matson, who said to his only daughter, "What do you really *know* about this boy?"

The couple started up farming near Rowan, Iowa, with little money and a lot of self-reliance. Howard made their furniture and rigged up a homemade washing machine. Ethel gardened and canned and Howard picked corn all winter by hand. Before long two daughters were born. With a sharp eye for opportunity, he took the civil service test for rural mail carrier. "I just wanted to see if I was smart enough to pass it." He did, and the family moved to nearby Clarion.

Recurring flashbacks continued to disburb him. He remembered, as if it were a foggily recalled dream, a feeling of desolation as a train clattered along the countryside, images of women in white, and acts of kindness from a farmer who gave apples to him and other children. He had been called Howard as far back as he could remember but somehow he thought he had had another name. The feeling would not leave.

As a child he had doubted that the Tressiders were his real parents. But the Tressiders insisted that he was their child and that early incidents he recalled were all his imagination.

Then fate took a hand. After Martha Tressider's death, Howard found a placing-out agreement from an orphanage. The document disclosed two important facts: his first name was Ira (no last name given), and the orphanage was the Methodist Deaconess, 114 Dearborn, Chicago.

Ira wrote to the address only to learn that the institution had long ago relocated to Lake Bluff, Illinois. Ira drove to the Lake Bluff orphanage. Superintendent Lucy Judson searched her records finding no account of Ira ever having been admitted to the institution. The placing-out agreement, however, could not be ignored. When he left Lake Bluff it was with Judson's promise to investigate further.

Judson soon sent word that the first record book used at the Chicago location had been found. (A fire had destroyed many

records, and others had been tucked away and forgotten.) The record revealed that Ira's father's name was Sherman Carrell and that he was alive when Ira was admitted to the orphanage. With the help of two Clarion friends, attorney L. N. Archerd and postmaster D. H. Eyler, Ira learned that Sherman Carrell was now living in Effingham, Illinois. Ira wrote to his father, introducing himself and requesting a meeting with him.

In August 1923 the reunion took place. Ira's brother-in-law, Leslie Matson, accompanied him to Effingham. "I knew they were a match when I watched the two men walk away from the station side-by-side," Matson recalled. "The father was tall and Ira was short but they both had the same gait."

Later at Sherman's home Ira's questions were answered. The pieces were beginning to fit. Ira learned that his mother, Sara, had died when he was three. His father had remarried, apparently hoping to provide him a real home. His second wife already had two daughters and two more children were born to the couple. Ira recalled repeated incidents of harsh punishment by the stepmother.

Sherman, fearing for his son's welfare, had sought help from a lawyer-friend who had advised sending the boy to an orphanage, explaining that thousands of children were being shipped all over the country on "orphan trains." He had assured Sherman that his son could be returned to him whenever he chose. (Apparently the father had never intended for Ira to be given to another family. Sherman's later inquiries to the orphanage had disclosed that although they remembered the boy, they had no record of what had happened to him.)

The same year Ira Carrell (left) was reunited with his father, he had this family portrait taken with his wife and two young daughters.

Ira also learned that he had lost an inheritance. His grandfather had named Ira heir to his estate. Advertisements had been placed in area newspapers to locate the whereabouts of Ira Carrell, "the little brownie from the Deaconess Orphanage," but the attempts had been futile. The legal time period in which to claim the inheritance had lapsed.

Later on the night of the reunion, Sherman entered his son's bedroom to cover him up. Ira pretended to be asleep. He was thirty-three years old.

The reunion was too late. The emotional cost had been too high. The men were strangers. Ira returned home to Clarion and settled into quiet living with his wife and daughters. He clung to them and to his religion, drawing upon them as antidotes to his bitterness. Ira now realized that the ten months in the orphanage had been the happiest time of his childhood.

After Ira's death in 1950 his daughter Ruth found a tin box among the few belongings he had kept. Inside were letters (one from Sherman, written in 1923) and a threadbare lady's glove.

There are old-timers in Clarion who will remember "Iry," as people used to call him. "He was that friendly mail carrier," some say. A few who weren't privy to his identity search remember him as Howard Tressider. Some wonder why he had two names.

As his daughter, I wrote this story to explain why. □